

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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The Christian Rural Fellowship Looks Ahead*

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Although the Christian Rural Fellowship is an association with an international membership, this paper is based on the assumption that the question now to be discussed relates only to the American rural church field. The very fact that this topic is raised for discussion indicates to my mind that someone is thinking that perhaps the splendid aims and functions of the Christian Rural Fellowship should now be expanded. I am sure that many people have been rejoicing in the splendid way in which the Fellowship, through its valuable Bulletins and the Annual Meetings, has so quickly come to occupy a unique position in the rural church movement. However, the present functions of the Fellowship are not enough to satisfy those of us who wish to hasten the development of the rural church movement and the Christianizing of rural life. The question then is: Shall this association throw itself into the promotion of cooperation between denominations? If so, how?

Very likely there is no one in this group who will deny there is a pressing need for more interdenominational cooperation, but there are those who do make this denial, and there are many others who do not sense the need. I am told that New York State is much more favorable to cooperation than other states. However this may be, we still have far to go in New York. We have church executives, interested in the same highly competitive villages, who have never met face to face, hundreds of communities where cooperation between the people of the various churches is hardly better than an armed truce, and many other communities where the relationships, even though professedly friendly, are shot through with suspicion and competition.

Interdenominational cooperation is most important on the local field, that is, in the local community. It is the local people and ministers who pay the price of the rivalry which, even though friendly, is still competitive. When ten churches in one community divide 1800 people between them, there is inevitably competition for members, attendance and finances. Is it any wonder that the 26 rural pastors in this same county had to be content with an average salary of \$829 in 1937, or that those in the lowest classification received but \$405 as an average? Discouragement, defeatism and hopeless despair are frequently found among the ministry and laity of such churches, and even among many who are much more fortunately situated. It is evident the situation needs to be faced effectively through interdenominational cooperation.

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There are various agencies which are facing the rural church situation and making much progress. Nevertheless, it would seem that an association made up primarily of the rank and file members of rural churches, that is, of the laity and rural pastors, might be very effective. Participation in such an association would, in my belief, do more than anything else to bring that feeling of fellowship and that common understanding of the problems and solutions, which would raise the morale and dignity of rural church life, and give great impetus to the movement for cooperation between the churches. Laity and pastors can achieve a voice and recognition and mutual encouragement as they voluntarily work together for the rural church cause. They will reinforce and inspire the constructive work of denominational officials in cooperation, and lead more of them to throw themselves into the movement for cooperation.

Granting there is a need for more interdenominational cooperation and a need for fellowship amongst all those people interested in better rural churches, the question may fairly be asked: Is it the proper function of the Christian Rural Fellowship to promote this interdenominational cooperation? If so, will it not be conflicting with such agencies as the Home Missions Council? As an official agency of the denominations, the Home Missions Council has a status and power which no voluntary membership organization such as the Christian Rural Fellowship can possibly have. It has a definite commission to function in comity matters.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the Fellowship is admirably adapted to perform a function which would powerfully supplement the comity work of the Council and similar agencies. It is our belief that a membership organization of like-minded people which cuts across all denominational lines occupies a strategic position in the rural church movement. It owes no allegiance to any official agency and, further, its strategy is that of education through the participation of pastors and laity. Belonging only to its members, it can bind together all those who are willing to study and work for high standards of rural church work. It can cut across all denominational lines and include laity, pastors and executives. It can also include those city people who are deeply interested. I can see no possible conflict with such official agencies as the Home Missions Council. Too often the pressure and the movement for cooperation between churches has come merely from the top. We are now in a time when this can be supplemented by a movement which expresses the enlightened wishes and desires of those who are close to the grass roots. The Christian Rural Fellowship is well adapted to do this by broadening its functions. Perhaps some of the ways in which it may do this, both through its national approach and through fostering state Fellowships, can be indicated by some of the developments in the New York State Fellowship.

The New York Christian Rural Fellowship will be four years old next February. It originated among a small group of pastors and laymen who felt a personal need for coming together for fellowship and educational purposes with those people who were vitally interested in the rural churches. It is in a unique position in that at about the same time an agency for giving field service to rural churches was set up with a budget for a part-time field secretary. This agency is the Rural Institute for Religious Workers. It has a board of directors of interested leaders in the church and agricultural worlds who have been able to secure funds for its work from interested churches, denominational agencies and the State Council of Churches. It also serves as the Rural Church Committee of the New York State Council of Churches. The field secretary of the Institute has been made the secretary-treasurer of the Fellowship in order to coordinate the two. With the assistance of the Rural Institute, the Fellowship has primary responsibility for the following:

1. Publication of the New York Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin. This contains rural church news, methods of work and related material. From 500 to 800 copies are circulated each quarter.

2. The Rural Church Day Program of Cornell University's Annual Farm and Home Week. The first year we had about sixty in attendance, while last year it averaged over 200 during each hour of the day. Last year I was interested to observe some district superintendents, city pastors and pastors to Cornell students scattered through the audience. Our annual luncheon on this day has had to be limited.

3. A two-day Annual State-wide Rural Church Conference at Lisle, New York, attended by pastors, laymen, laywomen and executives. About 150 were registered last May. It has been a healthy thing to have denominational executives present and we find their appreciation of each other and of the rural church increasing.

4. Development of regional Fellowship committees in various parts of the State. Two groups have been set up, one of which has functioned for two years. They are composed principally of pastors who meet monthly to study rural church methods and to plan conferences and other affairs for the promotion of the rural church movement. Cornell University and Oneonta Normal School are the centers of the two groups organized at present and we have requests for others to be started. It is our policy to center these committees around an educational institution both to give it a ready place of meeting, stability and prestige, and also as a means of increasing the school's interest in the rural communities which immediately surround it.

The keen and steadily growing interest in these projects has been highly gratifying and has vindicated the faith of those who dared to believe there were many people in New York State who were waiting for such a program to be developed and to share in that development. That the same may be true in other states is indicated by inquiries which we have received from Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, Georgia, Texas, Iowa and Pennsylvania. Evidently in those states, as in New York, there is a need for the mutual encouragement which comes through such a fellowship. Those men who are doing outstanding work are greatly strengthened by banding together to share inspiration and ideas.

More specifically it seems to me that the Christian Rural Fellowship may also aid interdenominational cooperation in such ways as the following:

1. Occasionally use the Bulletin, or supplements, to present news and reports of rural church developments in various parts of the country, particularly emphasizing church cooperation and news of the various state Fellowships.

2. See that these Bulletins circulate to scores of denominational executives even if it be necessary to send them free of cost.

3. Assist state Fellowships to develop wherever possible. Perhaps this can best be done by cooperating with some existing program such as Farm and Home Week, Summer Schools for Rural Pastors, Rural Pastors' Camps, etc. However, care should be taken to insure that the laity has an active part in the Fellowship. A further point in relation to this will be discussed later.

4. Encourage the development of student Fellowships on agricultural college and normal school campuses especially, so that graduates returning to rural communities will demand and work for cooperative churches.

5. Exchange publications with church and agricultural periodicals; also encourage such periodicals to give attention to the needs of rural religion.

Obviously the New York Christian Rural Fellowship has a unique advantage in the presence of the Rural Institute for Religious Workers. Where new Fellowships are being set up in various states and there is no agency comparable to the Rural

Institute, it would seem to be unwise to develop two organizations. I say this despite the perfectly happy way in which our New York arrangement has worked out. The general public, however, is sometimes confused at first by the presence of two rural church agencies.

How can this be done? If someone needs to be set aside to do field work, clearly a budget is necessary. Perhaps in some cases denominational bodies within a state could pool some funds for this purpose either through the State Council of Churches or otherwise. If so, such a person should be commissioned to spend part of his time developing the Fellowship. Regardless of this possibility, I believe that if someone can take some responsibility for developing the Fellowship, it may within a few years secure some funds from the field for the interdenominational program within the State. I would also offer another suggestion, namely, that rural pastors or laymen volunteer a proportion of their time to help bring churches together and to promote a Fellowship. This offers great hope. As to the use of pastors, I am now suggesting to one of our New York rural pastors that he undertake such a responsibility. We also have a layman who soon retires from an important position in a State Normal School who says he intends to spend the rest of his life putting larger parishes all over Cortland County.

Whatever form of development the organized movement takes in a state, we in New York State strongly believe that it should have provision for voluntary membership of all those interested. We believe the laity should be an important part of the movement for we want the laymen and pastors working side by side in the rural church movement. Our State Fellowship has been carefully developed with this in mind. During each year there have been one or two laymen on the small executive committee. The program during Cornell's Farm and Home Week and that at the Lisle Conference have been planned to appeal to the laity. Perhaps four-fifths of those in attendance at the former and more than a fourth at the latter have been laymen and laywomen. Twenty-one of the 111 present members of our Fellowship are lay people. We hope to increase this percentage.

I am dwelling upon this point of lay membership and participation for two reasons. First, I cannot visualize the rural church movement becoming very far-reaching unless the laity understands it and also gives to it a great deal of leadership and sacrificial service. Furthermore, there is developing in one section of our country a Fellowship in which the leaders, being very desirous to give prestige to and lift the morale of rural church workers, have adopted a membership requirement for pastors only and standards which will make membership an honor. At least these were the plans at the last time I was in touch with developments. We in New York State can sympathize with the aims but believe they are a mistake. We favor a Fellowship which is inclusive of all people who are vitally interested.

While interdenominational cooperation seems about to become the watchword of the hour, there is a grave danger that it will become top-heavy with the official leadership of the Christian churches and become too largely an official movement of the denominational overhead. I covet for the Christian Rural Fellowship the opportunity to help such cooperation forward in the local communities. They are the most important place for cooperation to take place, and the Fellowship can reach and bind together those far-seeing people in the various communities who are looking towards the day when Christ's prayer, that all who believe in Him shall be one as He and the Father are One, shall become a reality.
